



CRS Report for Congress

Tajikistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests

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Summary

This report outlines challenges faced by Tajikistan since its five-year civil war ended in 1997. It discusses U.S. policy and assistance. Basic facts and biographical information are provided. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Report RL33458, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, updated regularly.

U.S. Policy

According to the Administration, U.S. aid for border security, counter-narcotics control, democratization, health, education, and economic growth is key to improving Tajikistan's role as a bulwark against the regional threats of terrorism and drugs. (State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2009*).



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (08/02 M.Chin)

State Department officials served as observers at the U.N.-sponsored intra-Tajikistan peace talks and pledged rebuilding aid, an example of U.S. diplomatic efforts to head off or ease ethnic and civil tensions in the Eurasian states. The United States also supported the presence of U.N. military observers in Tajikistan during the 1992-1997 civil war. The United States has been the major humanitarian and developmental aid donor to facilitate implementation of the Tajik peace accord and for resettlement of displaced persons. Over the period FY1992-FY2007, the United States was the largest bilateral donor, budgeting \$771.3 million of aid for Tajikistan (FREEDOM Support Act and agency budgets), mainly for food and other humanitarian needs (by comparison, European Union members provided about \$470 million in grants and loans). The United States also facilitated the delivery of privately donated

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 10 JUL 2008		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Tajikistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave, SE, Washington, DC, 20540-7500				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 6	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

commodities. Estimated spending in FY2008 was \$31.9 million (FREEDOM Support Act and other foreign aid, excluding Defense and Energy Department funds), and the Administration has requested \$28.58 million for FY2009 (FREEDOM Support Act and other foreign aid). Much of the aid requested for FY2009 is planned for bolstering border security, which “remains a major challenge due to inexperience, lack of funds, and inadequate capacity.” Support for border guards, customs, and other security forces will help prevent illicit trafficking in narcotics and weapons of mass destruction and the transit of terrorists. A second focus of U.S. aid will be on economic programs to bolster agricultural production, encourage the trade in electricity with Afghanistan, foster banking reform, and increase micro-financing. The United States also will continue to emphasize Tajikistan’s “severe needs” for maternal and child healthcare, basic education, and natural disaster assistance (*Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2009*).

Basic Facts

Area and Population: Land area is 55,800 sq. mi., slightly smaller than Wisconsin. Population is 7.2 million (*The World Factbook*, mid-2008 est.). The Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region has called for greater autonomy, which is opposed by the Tajik government.

Ethnicity: 79.9% of the population is Tajik, 15.3% Uzbek, 1.1% Russian, 1.1% Kyrgyz (2000 Census). Clan and regional identities include the Khojenti, Kulyabi, Garmi, and Pamiri groups.

Gross Domestic Product: \$11.82 billion; per capita GDP is about \$1,800 (*The World Factbook*, 2007 est., purchasing power parity).

Political Leaders: *President:* Emomali Rahmon; *Prime Minister:* Oqil Oqilov; *Speaker of the National Assembly (upper chamber):* Mohammad Sayed Ubaydulloyev; *Speaker of the Assembly of Representatives (lower chamber):* Saydullo Khayrulloev; *Foreign Minister:* Hamrokhon Zarifi; *Defense Minister:* Col. Gen. Sherali Khayrulloev.

Biography: Rahmon was born in 1952 and trained as an economist. In 1988, he became a state farm director in Kulyab region. His rise to power was boosted by his links to the paramilitary leader and ex-convict Sangak Safarov. He became chair of the Kulyab regional government in late 1992, and weeks later was elected chair of the Supreme Soviet and proclaimed head of state. He was popularly elected president in 1994 and re-elected in 1999 and 2006.

Contributions to the Campaign Against Terrorism

During a January 2008 visit, then-commander of the U.S. Central Command, Admiral William Fallon, praised Tajikistan’s support for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan by granting overflight and basing rights.¹ After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, Tajikistan seemed to be willing to cooperate with the United States, but hesitant to do so without permission from Moscow. However, since Tajikistan had long supported the Afghan Northern Alliance’s combat against the Taliban, it was predisposed to welcome U.S.-led backing for the Northern Alliance. Perhaps after gauging Russia’s views, the Tajik Defense Ministry on September 25, 2001, offered use of Tajik airspace to U.S. forces, and some coalition forces began to transit through Tajik airspace and airfields. U.S., French, and British personnel have used the Dushanbe airport to a limited degree for refueling (the French maintain a presence of 100-200 personnel and some aircraft), but the poor condition of facilities has precluded wide-scale use by the coalition.

¹ Embassy of the United States, Dushanbe, Tajikistan. *Embassy News: Press Briefing with Admiral William Fallon*, January 22, 2008.

According to the State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007* (released April 2008), Tajikistan's poor budgetary resources have hampered its ability to secure its 1,400-mile border with Afghanistan, raising the threat that terrorists might transit the country from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The United States in 2007 provided communications equipment and counter-terrorism training to the border guards and other security forces. U.S. aid for education, public diplomacy, and economic development aims to ameliorate problems that might bolster terrorist recruitment. A possible terrorist bombing occurred outside the Supreme Court in June 2007, which did not result in casualties, and another at a conference hall in November 2007, which killed one person.

Foreign Policy and Defense

In April 2008, President Rahmon stated that Tajikistan was ready to "further expand relations of cooperation with countries of the West and the East, as well as those of the Islamic world, from the point of view of our open-door foreign policy." He pledged that Tajikistan would "remain an active partner" in the Global War on Terrorism and would "expand constructive collaboration with the United States, the European Union and other countries of the [anti-terrorist] coalition not only in this important field, but will also pay more attention to expanding beneficial economic cooperation." In November 2007, Rahmon explained that Tajikistan's "open door" foreign policy — "cooperation with any entity of international relations which has good intentions and aims towards our country" — might not please certain unnamed "powerful countries," but that the policy prevented Tajikistan from becoming a "puppet."² He has warned that Tajikistan faces a global environment where "the rivalry between different countries for international markets, resources of raw materials, fuel and energy reserves, and other natural wealth" is growing, and where arms races are intensifying. He has called instead for "beneficial international cooperation to reduce and prevent new global threats and dangers, [such as] terrorism, extremism, drugs production and trafficking, [and] organized transnational crime."³

Tajikistan is interested in the political and human rights of approximately seven million Tajiks residing in Afghanistan (25% of the population) and over one million in Uzbekistan (4%). Relations with Uzbekistan have been problematic, including disagreements about water-sharing, Uzbek gas supplies, and environmental pollution. In 1999-2001, Uzbekistan mined border areas along the Tajik-Uzbek border in response to incursions by terrorists traversing Tajikistan from Afghanistan. Other mines remain from the civil war and from the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan (along the Tajik-Afghan border). These mines reportedly have killed or injured 1,000 Tajiks. Efforts to clear the mines are ongoing.

The Tajik armed forces consist of about 8,800 ground, air force, and air defense troops.⁴ There also are about 3,800 paramilitary personnel in the Interior Ministry, 1,200 in the National Guard, and 2,500 in the Emergencies Ministry. The armed forces are underfunded and riven by regional clan loyalties that compromise their effectiveness. In

² Open Source Center. *Central Eurasia: Daily Report* (hereafter *CEDR*), November 16, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950361; April 25, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950185.

³ *CEDR*, September 8, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950171.

⁴ *The Military Balance*, February 5, 2008.

1999-2000, some 2,000 UTO fighters were incorporated into the Tajik armed forces. A 10-year (with options for renewal) Tajik-Russian basing agreement was signed in October 2004 that provides for Russia's former 201st Motorized Rifle Division to be based at three garrisons and to have access to three training grounds. Tajikistan also transferred ownership of the Okno space tracking base (near the town of Nurek) to Russia. In exchange, Russia cancelled a \$242 million debt. Russia's approximately 5,500 contract troops in Tajikistan constitute its second largest military presence abroad, after the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine. Tajikistan assumed control from Russia over guarding its borders in June 2005, although about 50 Russian border guard advisors and 20 instructors remain. In November 2006, Tajikistan and Russia signed an agreement to hold joint military training operations. Many Tajik officers receive training at Russian military schools.

Tajikistan is a signatory of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) of the CIS (led by Russia). In 2001, CST members approved the creation of a regional Anti-Terrorist Center (composed of intelligence agencies) and regional rapid-deployment military forces that include a Tajik battalion. In 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO; an economic and security organization led by China and Russia and including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) also approved the creation of an anti-terrorist regional center. Tajikistan joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in February 2002. At the signing, a NATO press release hailed Tajikistan's support to coalition forces in Afghanistan as "of key importance" to combating international terrorism. Tajikistan's then-Defense Minister Khayrulloev stated in March 2006, however, that Tajikistan intended to continue to rely on Russia for equipment and training.

The Tajik Civil War. Tajikistan was among the Central Asian republics least prepared and inclined toward independence when the Soviet Union broke up. In September 1992, a loose coalition of nationalist, Islamic, and democratic parties and groups tried to take over. Kulyabi and Khojenti regional elites, assisted by Uzbekistan and Russia, launched a successful counteroffensive that by the end of 1992 had resulted in 20,000-40,000 casualties and up to 800,000 refugees or displaced persons. In 1993, the CIS authorized "peacekeeping" in Tajikistan, consisting of Russian and token Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek troops. After the two sides agreed to a cease-fire, the U.N. Security Council established a small U.N. Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (UNMOT) in December 1994. In June 1997, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and then-rebel leader Sayed Abdullo Nuri signed a *comprehensive peace agreement*. Benchmarks of the peace process were largely met, and UNMOT pulled out in May 2000, but Russian troops have remained. Stability in Tajikistan is fragile. Observers remain concerned about possible secessionism in the northern Soghd (formerly Leninabad) region and in the western Gorno Badakhshan region, and tensions between ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks within Tajikistan.

Political and Economic Developments

Since the signing of the peace accords in 1997, Rahmon has steadily increased his authoritarian rule and marginalized the opposition. His ambit remains limited, however, by myriad local warlords. The main Tajik opposition groups boycotted the 1994 presidential election and a referendum on a new constitution because they had no say in drawing up the constitution (which establishes strong presidential rule) and would not be allowed to field their own candidates. The Tajik legislature in mid-1999 rubber-stamped constitutional changes proposed by Rahmon calling for a seven year presidential term, a two-house Supreme Assembly (legislature), and the legalization of religious parties. A

popular referendum approved the changes, and a presidential election was set for November 1999. Tajik opposition candidates alleged that government harassment prevented them from registering, so that Rahmon emerged as the only approved candidate. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) refused to monitor the election. Seeking to avert renewed war, Nuri agreed to respect the outcome of the election in return for pledges by Rahmon to allow fair legislative elections scheduled for February 2000. OSCE monitors later reported that this election presented voters with a range of candidates from competing parties, but they raised questions about freedom of the media, the independence of electoral commissions, turnout figures, and the transparency of vote tabulation.

A legislative electoral law was approved with input from the UTO in late 1999 calling for a lower chamber, the Assembly of Representatives, to consist of 63 members (22 elected by party list and 41 in single member districts), and an upper legislative chamber, the National Assembly, to consist of 34 members representing regional interests (25 selected by indirect voting by local council assemblies, eight appointed by Rahmon, and one reserved for the former president). Another referendum on changes to the constitution was held in June 2003. Opposition critics correctly predicted that one of the changes — limiting a president to two seven-year terms — would permit Rahmon to claim two more terms in office under the “new” amendment.

The four main opposition parties are the IRP, Democratic Party (DP), Social Democratic Party (SDP), and Communist Party (CP). The CP sometimes has allied itself with the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP). About 160 candidates (mostly PDP members) ran for the district seats in the February 27, 2005, election to the Assembly of Representatives. The OSCE reported “large-scale irregularities,” including the presence of government officials on many electoral commissions, close government control of campaigning, ballot box stuffing, and doubtful ballot counting. After runoff races in March, the PDP had won 51 seats, the CP 5, the Islamic Revival Party 2, and independents 5. Selection of deputies to the National Assembly in late March 2005 resulted in 29 seats for the PDP, 2 for the CP, and 3 for independent candidates.

Five candidates ran in the presidential election in Tajikistan held on November 6, 2006, including incumbent President Rahmon. All four “challengers” praised Rahmon and campaigned little. The opposition DP and SD parties boycotted the race, claiming it was undemocratic, and the IRP chose not to field a candidate. Rahmon officially received 79.3% of 2.88 million votes with a nearly 91% turnout. According to OSCE observers, the race was slightly improved over the 1999 presidential election but still lacked “genuine choice and meaningful pluralism,” including because of the dearth of meaningful debate by the candidates, improbable turnout figures in some precincts, use of administrative resources, and non-transparent vote-counting.⁵

According to the State Department’s *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007* (released in March 2008), The government’s human rights record remained poor. Arbitrary arrest and detention remained serious problems, and police and security officers beat and otherwise abused detainees to extort confessions. Authorities often falsified

⁵ OSCE. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. *Final Report on the 6 November 2006 Presidential Election in Tajikistan*, April 18, 2007.

reasons for arrest or inflated minor problems to make politically motivated arrests, and exerted pressure on judges. Independent media were subject to intimidation such as selective tax inspections, and media outlets regularly practiced self-censorship out of fear of government reprisals. The government controlled most printing presses, the supply of newsprint, and broadcasting facilities. The government generally refused to grant permits for rallies on the grounds that large gatherings could lead to violence, but a few groups staged protests without permission and did not suffer reprisals. The government continued to refuse to register some opposition political parties. Religious freedom deteriorated during the year. Authorities at times restricted Muslim religious activities. Trafficking of persons was a serious problem. Reportedly, government officials in customs, border control, immigration, police, and tourism took bribes from traffickers or even acted as patrons of traffickers. The government did not enforce child labor laws and continued to force students to pick cotton.

In late 1997, Tajikistan's economic decline reversed as the peace accord took hold. GDP grew about 7.8% and inflation was 13.2% in 2007 (*The World Factbook* est.). Tajikistan has depended heavily on foreign loans and aid to cover its budget and trade deficits. Tajikistan's foreign debt reportedly was \$1.3 billion in early 2008. Most small enterprises had been privatized by 2000, but land and major enterprises remain state-owned. Tajikistan's aluminum smelter in Tursunzade, one of the world's largest, claims that it accounted for three-fourths of Tajikistan's foreign currency earnings in 2007. Cotton and hydro-electricity are other exports. The agricultural sector employs two-thirds of the labor force. The government reported in early 2008 that more than 50% of the population lived below the poverty level (defined as incomes of less than \$1 per day), and warned that rising inflation threatened poverty-reduction efforts.⁶ Up to one million Tajiks — nearly 50% of the labor force — are labor migrants. According to the State Department, "the culture of corruption, fueled by the huge amount of drugs passing through the country [from Afghanistan], poses a significant threat to Tajikistan's stability and prosperity."⁷ In March 2008, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced that it was demanding the early repayment of \$47 million in loans to Tajikistan. While receiving IMF loans, the Tajik National Bank had failed to report that its reserves had been depleted by losses in the cotton-growing sector.

At the end of January 2008, severe winter weather and electricity, gas, and food shortages led the Tajik government to declare a humanitarian crisis and ask the United Nations for assistance. The U.N. and other organizations launched an appeal for urgent assistance, which has amounted in \$13.8 million in international donations as of mid-July 2008. The United States is the major donor of fuel, medicine, and food. Rahmon reported in April 2008 that the harsh winter and an ongoing drought had caused financial losses of more than \$843 million, and in June 2008 he warned that the lingering drought was harming agricultural output. Some observers have raised concerns that these economic dislocations might lead to civil unrest.

⁶ CEDR, January 23, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950250.

⁷ U.S. Department of State. *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2008*, March 2008.